



**CITY OF SOMERVILLE**  
**DOROTHY A. KELLY GAY, MAYOR**

## ***ASSEMBLY SQUARE REVITALIZATION PLAN*** ***2002 MAJOR PLAN CHANGE***



**May 2002**

**SOMERVILLE REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY**  
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**PREPARED BY THE OFFICE OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### ***Introduction***

In 1980, the Somerville Redevelopment Authority (SRA), the City of Somerville, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts approved an urban renewal plan for the Assembly Square district known as the “Assembly Square Revitalization Plan” (the “1980 Plan”). This document is a Major Plan Change to the 1980 Plan and is entitled the “2002 Plan”. The 2002 Plan amends the 1980 Plan by adding:

- ❖ New effective dates
- ❖ Restated goals
- ❖ New maps to reflect currently existing and proposed conditions
- ❖ A finding of continued eligibility
- ❖ New development objectives reflecting a new vision for Assembly Square
- ❖ New acquisition and disposition parcels
- ❖ An updated financial plan
- ❖ Evidence of municipal approvals required for the major plan change
- ❖ Current expectations regarding site preparation
- ❖ Currently proposed short and long term public improvements
- ❖ Obligations to be imposed upon designated redevelopers
- ❖ Specifications and designations regarding disposition parcels
- ❖ Citizen participation

### ***New Effective Dates***

The 2002 Plan will take effect August 1, 2002, or upon such date as approved by the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), at which time it will supersede the 1980 Plan. The 2002 Plan will remain in effect until August 1, 2022.

### ***Prior Plan Changes***

This is the first Major Plan Change to the 1980 Plan. There have been a number of Minor Plan Changes over the years, as described below:

1. Extension of the original expiration date from February 1, 2000 to February 1, 2001 (authorized by the SRA 1/00, approved by DHCD 1/00);

2. Amending section 10.1 to authorize acquisition of property not related to UDAG-funded improvements (authorized by the SRA 12/99, approved by DHCD 11/00);
3. Naming of the former B&M Rail Yards, also known as “Yard 21” (parcel NA-D4) as an acquisition parcel (authorized by the SRA 12/99, approved by DHCD 11/00);
4. Extension of the revised expiration date from February 1, 2001 to February 1, 2002 (authorized by the SRA 1/01, approved by DHCD 1/01);
5. Naming of “Yard 21” as disposition parcel B-9 (authorized by the SRA 5/01, approved by DHCD 6/01);
6. Rewording of Section 14 of this Plan to match that language with current regulations (authorized by the SRA 12/01, approved by DHCD 1/02); and
7. Extension of the revised expiration date from February 1, 2002 to August 1, 2002 (authorized by the SRA 1/01 and 1/02, approved by DHCD 1/02)

### ***The New Vision for Assembly Square***

The 1980 Plan was created to assist in the transition of the Assembly Square district from warehouse/distribution, heavy industrial, and rail yards to commercial uses including retail, office, hotel, restaurant and entertainment. More than twenty years later that transition is still underway. The 1980 Plan recommended further public action if its goals and objectives were not met within the original twenty-year period. Faced with the expiration of the original plan, the City of Somerville initiated a major planning process for the Assembly Square District in 1999. A team of outside professional planning consultants led this effort in conjunction with the Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD), a citizen advisory committee, and members of the public at a series of well-attended community meetings. The product of this effort was a new planning document, entitled “Assembly Square Planning Study: The Vision and Implementation Plan for the Future” (the “Planning Study”). The Planning Study has demonstrated the need for ongoing public action in Assembly Square. Although all the goals and objectives of the 1980 Plan have not been realized, there is a renewed commitment to achieve them over the next twenty years.

The Planning Study established a mission statement for revitalization of the Assembly Square district:

*Create the best use of Assembly Square physically, economically, environmentally and socially by taking advantage of the regional transportation, economic and cultural contexts. Fulfill the best interests of businesses, residents and the City, and ultimately improve the quality of life for the City at large, in a time frame that takes into consideration both economic phasing and feasibility.*

*Accomplish this by:*

- *Maximizing economic benefits and creating employment opportunities*
- *Providing community amenities*
- *Providing for expanded access, use and protection of the Mystic River*
- *Creating more open space*
- *Improving public transit service and all other modes of access to the site*
- *Protecting the environment.*

The Planning Study envisions Assembly Square as a vibrant, twenty-four-hour district --- an urban village with its own unique identity. The vision includes mixed use development, a new transit stop, a new “Main Street” and new secondary roads, expanded and improved waterfront parks along the Mystic River, and tree-lined streets and landscaped public open spaces throughout.

**The principles of the new vision are:**

- ❖ *Create diverse new uses:* The Planning Study recommended a diverse mix of uses for the Assembly Square district, including residential, office, research and development, retail, hotels, cinemas, a performing arts center, and institutional uses with development goals of at least 900 residential units, 4,500,000 square feet of office and R&D, 1,000,000 square feet of retail (including entertainment) and restaurant, 180,000 square feet of hotel, 32,000 square feet of institutional, 9,000 parking spaces in garages, and 1,600 parking spaces on-grade.
- ❖ *Create jobs, tax revenues and amenities for Somerville:* The Planning Study estimates that the Assembly Square district has the potential to develop a total of 15,400 jobs and generate a total of \$17.67 million in net tax revenue over a 20-year timeframe. The Planning Study also determined that the district could host a variety of new amenities for the City, such as additional open space, a civic arts center, and new transit connections.
- ❖ *Create a place at Assembly Square:* The Planning Study recommends creating a unique feeling in the district that reflects the significance of the district in history and the region.
- ❖ *Strengthen links to the region:* The Planning Study recommends increasing and improving access to the district by including a new rapid transit station, new bicycle and pedestrian connections, and improved roadway access;
- ❖ *Become an alternative to the “downtown” or to the “suburb”:* The Planning Study determined that an intermediate density was most appropriate for Assembly Square, both because of the capacity of the land and the context of the site. By “intermediate” density, the Planning Study meant an average floor area ratio of approximately 1.0, or approximately 6 million square feet of development across the site;

- ❖ *Enhance the environment:* The Planning Study recommends that new development in the district have positive impacts on the environment, through improved stormwater management, additional parkland, and environmentally sensitive design;
- ❖ *Become a development leader for the region:* The Planning Study recommends that Assembly Square provide a leading example of how to redevelop a challenging district with constraints;
- ❖ *Create additional open space:* The Planning Study recommends the creation of approximately 8 acres of new open space, including a major new park in the heart of the district, additional parkland along the Mystic River, and smaller “pocket parks” around the district;
- ❖ *Improve the water quality of the Mystic River and the character of the waterfront:* The Planning Study recommends improving water quality in the Mystic River through improved stormwater management as part of redevelopment of the Assembly Square district. It also recommends a change in the nature of the waterfront through the expansion of the waterfront park, and the development of attractive, appropriately scaled buildings along the park that will help frame the river and parkland.

## **2002 Plan Goals**

Many of the goals of the 1980 Plan are still valid. As restated to incorporate the vision of the Planning Study, the 2002 Plan Goals are as follows:

- ***To develop Assembly Square, an underutilized and decadent area, with a mix of residential, office, research and development, retail, hotels, cinemas, performing arts centers and institutional uses, giving preference to structured parking.***

The 2002 Plan proposes at least 6 million square feet of development in Assembly Square and adopts as minimum goals the development goals proposed in the Planning Study: namely 900 residential units, 4,500,000 sf. of office and R&D, 1,000,000 of retail (including entertainment) and restaurant, 180,000 sf. of hotel,, 32,000 sf. of institutional, 9,000 parking spaces in garages, and 1,600 parking spaces on-grade.

- ***To increase the real estate investment and tax base of the project area and thereby that of the City of Somerville as a whole.***



The city's commercial tax base has declined as a percentage of the total valuation of the city over the past twenty years. In FY '88 commercial, industrial and personal property value comprised 23.6% of the city's total valuation. By FY'02 it had declined to 16.2% of the city's total valuation. The decline of the commercial tax base creates the following major problems: 1) shifts the property tax burden to residential taxpayers including elderly and low/moderate income homeowners and renters; 2) limits the city's ability to generate additional tax revenue under Proposition 2 ½ for education, public safety, human services and other basic services; 3) forces the city to rely on state local aid for a significant portion of its total municipal budget; and 4) limits the city's ability to bond for long term capital improvement projects. Meeting the development goals set forth in the 2002 Plan is expected to generate at least \$17 Million in new tax revenue.

- ***To provide additional jobs for residents of Somerville at all income levels and skills to help stabilize the economy of the City and its residents.***

Somerville needs to create additional employment opportunities within its own borders. The city has long been known as a "bedroom community" where the majority of residents leave each day to go to work. According to the state Department of Employment and Training, in 2001 Somerville had only 0.30 jobs for every resident as compared to Cambridge with 1.14 jobs per resident and Boston with 0.99 jobs per resident. Meeting the development goals set forth in the 2002 Plan is expected to create over 15,000 additional jobs, bringing Somerville's estimated jobs per resident ratio up to approximately 0.50.

- ***To promote accessibility into and within Assembly Square by improving and increasing the number of roadways and expanding and enhancing pedestrian and bicycle access.***

The urban renewal area is bounded by Interstate 93 and Route 28 (the Fellsway) but access from each of these major arteries into Assembly Square is difficult. The 2002 Plan includes a Waterfront Roadway that will improve access from the Fellsway to Assembly Square; improvements to the I-93/Mystic Ave/Route 28 intersection, repeatedly cited as one of the 10 most dangerous intersections in Massachusetts; and a bicycle path connection underneath the Wellington Bridge. In addition, the 2002 Plan will enhance interior accessibility with a new street grid, pedestrian friendly sidewalks, and reconstruction of existing bike paths.

- ***To replace low density and vacant areas and incompatible uses and buildings with mixed-use development and an urban scale street grid and block size closer to urban scale.***

The 2002 Plan names as acquisition and disposition parcels certain properties that are occupied by incompatible uses and lie in the path of the proposed street grid for the area and the proposed MBTA station.

- ***To improve the utility infrastructure in Assembly Square and encourage remediation of former industrial sites to a level suitable for the proposed mix of uses, including residential.***

The Planning Study recommends improving stormwater management as part of redevelopment of Assembly Square. The proposed public improvements in the 2002 Plan include utility upgrades that will help alleviate flooding in the area and improve water quality in the Mystic River. Redevelopers are required to remediate sites to a level appropriate for the proposed uses in accordance with the Massachusetts Contingency Plan.

- ***To expand and improve the Mystic River waterfront and create new public open space in Assembly Square.***

Somerville is the most densely populated community in the Commonwealth, with 18,797 residents per square mile, and open space is very limited. At the same time, the Mystic River waterfront in Assembly Square is underutilized. The 2002 Plan proposes the creation of over 6 acres of new open space, including additional parkland along the Mystic River and smaller “pocket parks” around the district.

- ***To construct a new Orange Line Station on or near Yard 21 and to obtain an Urban Ring connection to Assembly Square***

The SRA acquired Yard 21 to facilitate the construction of a new Orange Line Station. One of the key obligations of the redeveloper will be to ensure to the maximum possible extent that the station is designed and constructed on or adjacent to Yard 21. The new Orange Line Station and an Urban Ring connection are public improvements included in this Major Plan Change. In addition, OHCD recently commissioned a comprehensive transportation study of the Assembly Square district funded by the Massachusetts Highway Department. The results of this study may identify other transportation related improvements needed to ensure that Assembly Square reaches its full development potential.

- ***To increase Somerville’s supply of affordable housing units.***

Somerville is a desirable residential location as a result of its proximity to Boston and Cambridge, fine restaurants, live entertainment venues, low crime rate, ethnic diversity, and strong sense of neighborhoods. These factors, combined with the elimination of rent control in Cambridge and Boston in 1995, have driven up residential rents and sales prices. Between 1994 and 2001, the average home sale price (including one-, two- and three-family dwellings and condominiums) increased from \$125,000 to \$314,000. Similarly, rents for 2-bedrooms apartments doubled from \$750 per month in 1994 to \$1500 and higher by 2001. The mixed-use development proposed in the 2002 Plan will include at least 125 affordable

units at Assembly Square and additional monies for affordable housing throughout the city as a result of linkage payments.

- ***To employ and develop innovative financial strategies for accomplishing the urban renewal goals.***

The 2002 Plan encourages public/private partnerships involving public sector support for private investment in the urban renewal area in the form of tax increment financial agreements, brownfields grants and loans, and obtaining funding for public improvements in Assembly Square from other public sources. OHCD, on behalf of the SRA, has staff and financial resources to assist in public/private partnerships.

### ***Future Changes to Urban Renewal Plan***

The SRA, acting by and through OHCD, may make minor plan changes or major plan changes to the Assembly Square Revitalization plan at any time, and the process for making such plan changes shall conform to regulations at 780 CMR 12.03, a copy of which is attached, or successor regulations.

### ***Other State Filings***

Notice of the 2002 Plan will be filed with the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act office as per the requirements of 301 CMR 11.00 et seq.

### ***Format***

The 2002 Plan follows the format of urban renewal regulations set forth at 760 CMR 12.00 et seq., and its sections are numbered to correspond to sections in the regulations, beginning with 12.02(1).

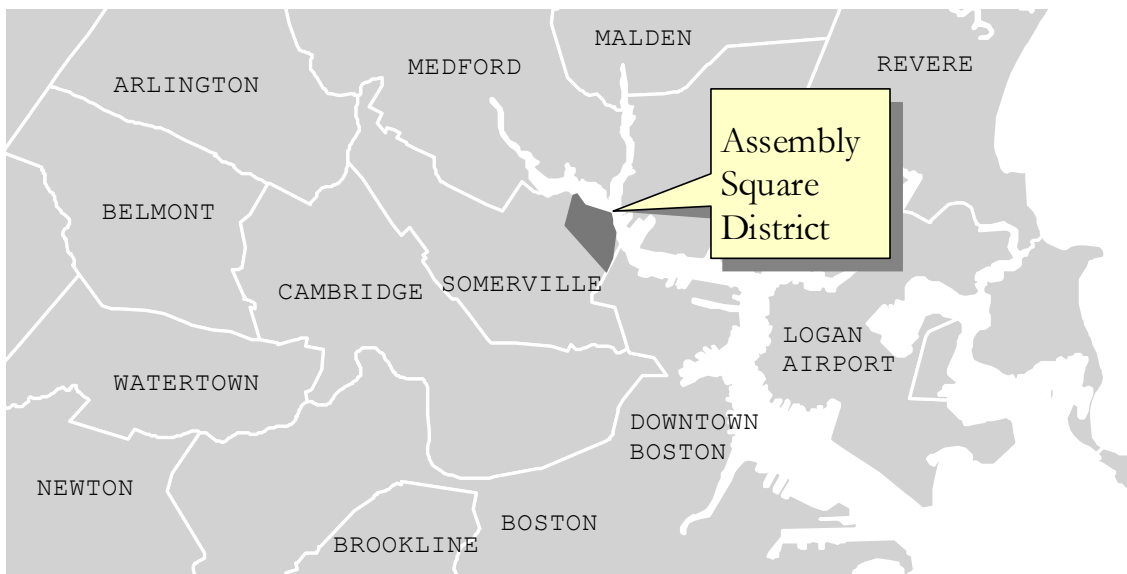
### ***Severability***

Should any section, paragraph, or provision of the Plan be rendered unconstitutional, or invalid, such decision shall not affect the whole or any part thereof other than the part so decided to be unconstitutional or invalid.

## **12.02(1) Characteristics of the Site**

### **(a) Project Area and Topography**

The urban renewal area consists of 129.4 acres (not including public and railroad rights of way) in the City of Somerville in Middlesex County. It is surrounded by the cities of Boston, Everett, Medford, and Somerville. It is approximately two miles northwest of downtown Boston and a mile north of the Lechmere/Kendall Square district of East Cambridge.

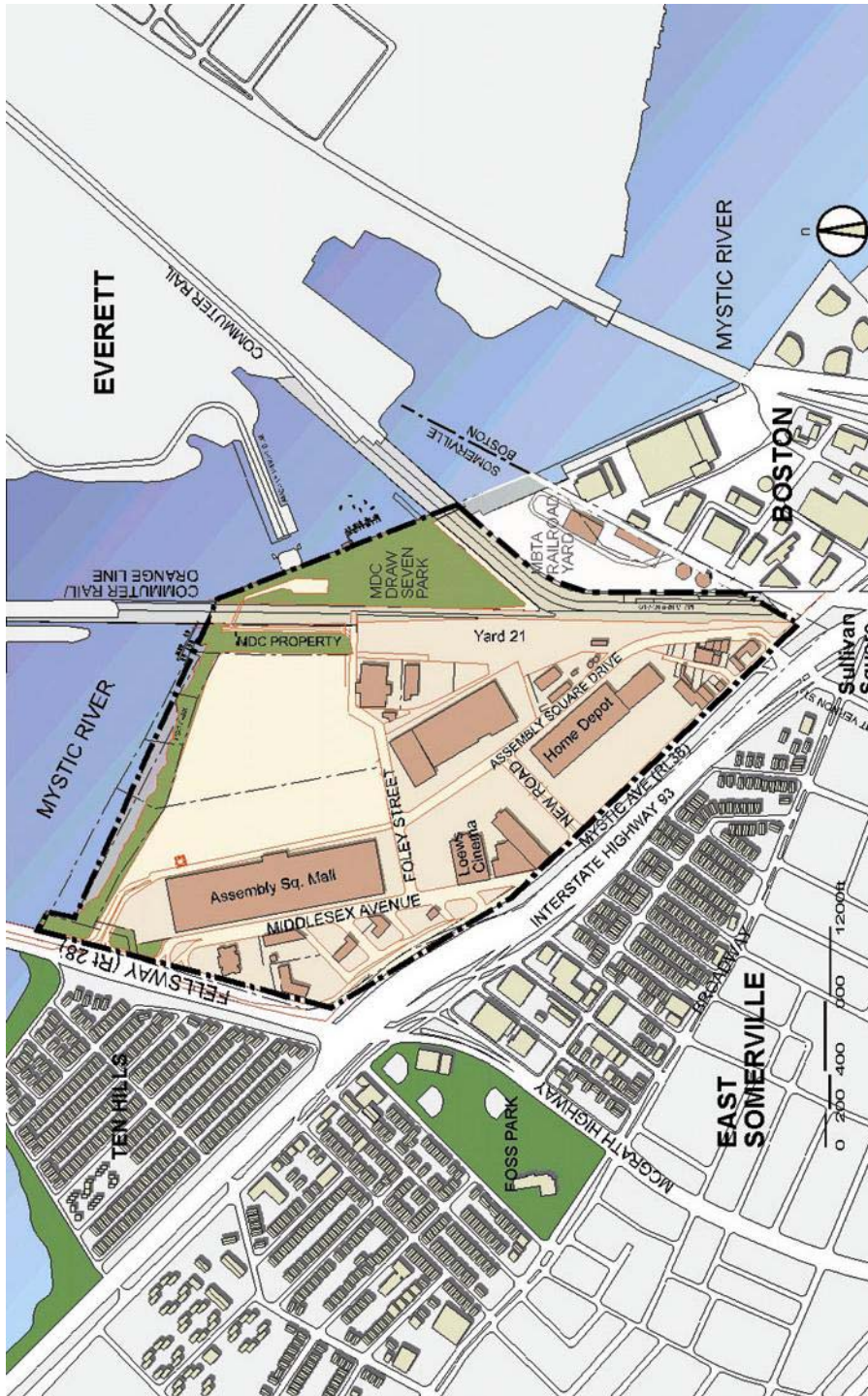


**Map 1-(a) -1: Project Area in a Regional Context**

The urban renewal area consists of the entire area commonly referred to as “Assembly Square” and is bounded by to the north, south, east, and west as follows:

- ❑ The Mystic River, to the north and east;
- ❑ The Fellsway (Route 28,) to the west;
- ❑ Interstate 93 to the southwest; and
- ❑ MBTA Rapid Transit/Commuter Rail property to the south.

A boundary map follows:



Map 1-(a) -2: Project Area Boundary